

## Navigating the First-Year Program: Exploring New Waters in a Faculty Learning Community

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A new first-year seminar at a large research-intensive university provided the context for a topic-based faculty learning community (FLC) in which the first faculty to teach in the program worked together to identify the most effective ways of conducting the seminar. Membership in the FLC consisted of faculty from diverse disciplines and with varying degrees of experience with first-year students. Content analysis of an oral interview protocol reveals a heightened faculty focus regarding their goals and preparedness for teaching freshmen. Specifically, participants whose initial motivation for teaching the course was to interact with entering students became, through the course of the semester, more focused on defining pedagogical strategies that would lead to greater student engagement in the course. Results suggest that future faculty support for the new program could be structured around the principal emerging themes from this analysis.

First-year seminars can play a large part in the academic and personal success of college students. Considered a high-impact practice (Kuh, 2008), first-year seminars have been shown to correlate with higher first-to-second year retention and persistence toward graduation (Kuh, 2009; Pascarella & Terenzini 2005; Tinto, 1993). A recent source states that as many as ninety-four percent of U.S. colleges campuses offer first-year seminars (Keup, 2012). Perhaps the greatest strength of the first-year seminar is the opportunity it allows for students to interact with faculty, who, in many first-year programs, are tenure-track professors with years of experience in their field and a well-established knowledge of the campus culture (Keup, 2012).

With these benefits come challenges. The interaction that occurs between students and faculty in a first-year seminar is likely to be quite different from the interaction that takes place in other types of courses. Faculty accustomed to upper-level classes or lecture-style classes, or who are some years removed from teaching first-year students, may need to refresh themselves on the most effective teaching modalities. The needs of freshmen differ from those of upperclass students (McClure, Atkinson & Wills, 2008) and, further, will be different from what faculty remember from their own time as students (Ouellett, 2004). For this reason, many institutions with first-year programs offer, and sometimes require, varied forms of faculty development (Gordon & Foutz, 2013; Tobolowsky, 2008). This paper will report on the findings from a faculty learning community (FLC) designed to assist a cohort of faculty participating in a new first-year seminar program at a large research-intensive university. FLC participants spent the academic year identifying common teaching challenges and collaborating on ways to overcome them, meet the goals of the program, and enhance the teaching and learning experience.

### First-Year Seminars

Research has shown that first-year seminars have a positive effect not only on students (Kuh, 2009; Pascarella & Terenzini 2005; Tinto, 1993) but also on the faculty that teach them (Fidler, Nuerurer-Rotholz, & Richardson, 1999). Faculty who teach first-year seminars often enjoy building interdisciplinary networks with others and enjoy reacquainting themselves with the world of freshmen (Wanca-Thibault, Shepherd, & Staley, 2002). They also report transferring the teaching and assessment skills used in a freshman seminar to other courses (Barefoot, 1993; Fidler, Nuerurer-Rotholz, & Richardson, 1999), and with that, a heightened sense of self-consciousness about one's own teaching skills (McClure, Atkinson, & Wills, 2008). Additionally, Soldner, Lee, and Duby (2004) found that faculty who are motivated by intrinsic factors such as helping students and collaborating with other faculty are likely to persist in their teaching of freshman seminars.

While potentially rewarding, teaching the freshmen seminar may also present significant challenges. Many first-year programs are designed to promote interaction between faculty and students, but as Walsh and Maffei (1995) point out, these are two groups that have differing visions about the nature of their interaction: faculty expect a strong commitment to learning on both sides of the relationship, while students may approach the relationship informally and expect their professors to be accommodating. The authors suggest that when expectations are understood by both parties, the relationship is positive and students become more motivated and academically successful. Attaining that level of interaction, however, may not come naturally to some faculty, particularly those that are not trained in pedagogy or are unfamiliar with the freshman mindset. Success with a classroom full of new college students may require a different type of effort and skill.

Evidence from one study revealed that eighty percent of first-year faculty reported having to use different pedagogy in freshmen seminars than what they would use in other courses (Fidler, Neururer-Rotholz, & Richardson, 1999). The gulf between student and faculty expectations extends beyond the nature of their relationship to areas such as technology usage, where faculty unwillingness or inability to use technology may harm their efforts to engage their students academically (Howe & Strauss, 2003). To address these challenges and others, faculty development initiatives of various forms have been a common feature of first-year programs for many years and aim to enhance faculty understanding of their students and how best to teach them (Hunter, 2006).

### **The First-Year Odyssey Seminar Program**

The First-Year Odyssey Seminar (FYOS) program was launched in the fall of 2011 at the University of Georgia (UGA) to fulfill the requirement of a Quality Enhancement Plan of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC). Faculty and students chose the plan from among many initial proposals, and further planning resulted in a final program that was a required, one credit hour class designed to meet the following three overarching goals:

1. Introduce first-year students to the importance of learning and academics to engage them in the academic culture of the University.
2. Give first-year students an opportunity for meaningful dialogue with a faculty member to encourage positive, sustained student-faculty interactions.
3. Introduce first-year students to the instruction, research, public service and international mission of the University and how they relate to teaching and learning in and outside the classroom to increase student understanding of and participation in the full mission of the University.

Of the various types of first-year seminars that exist (Swing, 2002), the seminar that forms the backdrop of this paper most closely aligns with an academic seminar with variable content in that all sections of the seminar focused on academic topics related to the scholarship of the instructors, as echoed in the first goal of the program above. Survey research suggests that this type is proportionately more common at research-intensive universities (Brent, 2006). The decision to address any elements typically found in a transitional seminar, such as developing students' study skills, introducing them to campus resources, etc., was left to the discretion of individual faculty. An additional

program-wide requirement that students attend three campus events during the semester was intended to help faculty attain the third goal of the program: introducing students to the mission of the University. A "campus event" could be a lecture, exhibit, cultural festivity, etc. Faculty employed various methods for helping students identify events and also for helping them to make the connection between the events and the seminar.

### **Faculty Learning Communities**

The concept of the faculty learning community (FLC) can be traced to John Dewey's work with student learning communities, organized structures where learning is "active, student-centered and involved shared inquiry" (Dewey, 1933). The essential characteristics of the student learning community are easily extended to faculty, who actively collaborate in a year-long learning environment in order to "investigate, attempt, assess, and adopt new methods, such as using appropriate technology, active learning, and learner-centered teaching" (Cox, 2001, 2002). FLC participants grow as individuals while collaborating to ensure the growth of all members (Orquist-Ahrens & Torosyan, 2008). In many FLCs members work to address a common interest, such as an institutional initiative, while advancing individual projects shaped by their own discipline. This interdisciplinarity, in turn, may lead faculty to adopt a broader view of teaching (Yakura & Bennett, 2003).

FLCs are a form of faculty development that can be particularly helpful for institutions embarking on new initiatives, where faculty buy-in is key to success (Furco, 2002; Zlotkowski & Williams, 2003). In the safe and supportive environment of the learning community faculty can share in the discussion of how a particular innovation or initiative impacts their teaching and their students' learning. FLC participation has been shown to have positive effects on both the faculty and student experience in cases where the institution is undertaking a particular educational innovation or seeking to enhance teaching and learning in a particular area. Accounts of topic-based FLCs for service-learning faculty report positive effects of participation, such as increased faculty expectations that service-learning could be useful to their professional development in teaching, research and service (Furco & Moely, 2012; Harwood et al., 2005). Smith et al. (2008), writing on the results of an FLC for faculty teaching STEM disciplines, also report that faculty found the community helped them engage the students better, which in turn helped their students become better critical thinkers. The structure and timeline of the FLC provides sufficient time and space for all members to experience the issue at hand, discuss it with colleagues, and seek answers through the interdisciplinary lens of

the group. This is in contrast to a workshop format which provides only a glance into the issue, leaving faculty to work through the specifics, successfully or not, on their own (Nugent et al., 2008).

The facilitators wanted to capture the experience of these faculty, the first to venture into the new waters of the program. What were their initial goals for the course? What challenges did they encounter? Did participation in the FLC contribute positively to their experience? The research questions guiding this study were:

1. How do faculty goals and expectations for teaching a new first-year seminar course change as a result of teaching the course?
2. How does participation in a faculty learning community on the topic of the first-year seminar affect faculty experience with the seminar?

To elicit this information the facilitators, hereafter referred to as the authors, decided to pursue qualitative interviews with a subset of the FLC participants.

## Methods

### Participants

Participants were faculty from diverse disciplines and with varied degrees of experience with first-year students, from no experience to almost daily contact. Table 1 lists the participants (pseudonyms used) by discipline and gives a short description of their relationship with first-year students. All were participants in an FLC designed for first-time instructors in the new seminar program.

As often happens in FLCs, the initial roster of membership included eleven members, but other commitments forced the withdrawal of several members early in the first semester. Two more joined in the second half of the year and only attended a couple of meetings. The authors believed that the richest information would be gleaned from those who had the fullest experience with the FLC. Therefore, the final participant pool (N=6) consisted of the faculty who met consistently over the academic year, engaged in discussion, and contributed questions, ideas and strategies to the other members of the group. The researchers were not included in this pool.

### Research Setting

The backdrop for this data collection was a topic-based faculty learning community titled, "Your First First-Year Odyssey." Topic-based FLCs address teaching needs or other matters of concern to an interdisciplinary group of faculty (Cox, 2004). Given

the unique nature of the new seminar program and the likelihood that some faculty might have to adjust their standard pedagogy, and with evidence that FLCs can provide support for faculty exploring new teaching practices, the FLC was offered as a form of faculty support and development for instructors of the new seminar program. At UGA, FLCs are administered through the Center for Teaching and Learning and the "FYOS FLC" was opened for registration to interested faculty in the spring preceding the fall launch of the program. The FLC had two goals: first, to provide structured assistance to the FYOS instructors in the form of resources, strategies and partnership-building, and second, to elicit feedback that could inform concurrent and future institutional efforts to support FYOS faculty. Two faculty administrators, both heavily involved in the development of the new program, facilitated the FLC and were also FYOS instructors.

Input from campus-wide discussions during the previous year of program planning influenced the preliminary scheduling of topics for the FLC, a schedule presented to participants at the first meeting and adjusted slightly to accommodate specific concerns raised by some faculty (e.g. concerns of those without experience teaching freshmen). In this and all other FLCs, participation was voluntary, goal-oriented, structured, interdisciplinary, supportive and safe (Furco & Moely, 2012). Participants were expected to attend as many meetings as possible, to share their challenges and breakthroughs, and to complete the regular assignment that followed each meeting: to apply one thing learned from the discussion to his or her class and to report back at the next meeting. Minutes from each meeting were circulated after via email. The FLC met during seven, ninety-minute sessions over the academic year. Meetings were typically held at midday over lunch obtained with the \$500 yearly stipend from the Center for Teaching and Learning. Table 2 outlines the topics and goals for each FLC meeting.

As early as the first meeting it was evident that the members of our group were approaching the task of teaching the new seminar from perspectives that differed not only by academic discipline, but also by their degree or type of experience with first-year students. The unique and ambitious goals of this first-year program created another layer to this rich mix of faculty collaboration. As previously described, faculty were expected to attain programmatic goals that included introducing students to the role of the faculty member in a research university, teaching the three-part mission of UGA, and creating lasting relationships with students in their classes. Also, they were to attain these goals in a rigorous academic course based on their area of scholarship. Most faculty were confident that they could interact with students in a way that encouraged class discussion and incited interest in the class topic. In

Table 1  
*FLC participants*

Participant	Discipline	Experience with First-Year Students
Bob	Counseling	Frequently works with first- and second-year students on matters related to academic success and persistence.
Sara	Faculty and TA Development	Works with new graduate student teaching assistants.
Sam	Physics and Astronomy	Teaches all levels of students, often teaches undergraduates in large lecture classes.
Kate	Environmental Design	Teaches all levels with a very hands-on, field-based methodology.
Ann	Veterinary Medicine	Teaches graduate students. First experience teaching first-year students.
Grace	Linguistics	Teaches all levels of theoretical linguistics in small class sections.

Table 2  
*“Your First First-Year Odyssey” Discussion Schedule*

Month	General topic	Session details
August	FYOS goals	Our goals, expectations and concerns about the new course
September	Engaging the student and encouraging intentional learning	Getting students to talk more: Tips from Director for Faculty and TA Development, Center for Teaching and Learning
October	First-year pedagogy	Individual reports: Successfully addressing challenging aspects of this course
November	Resources: Using the <i>eLearning Commons</i> (eLC) site.	Common FYOS challenges: Selecting eLC resources to help
January	Lesson from the first semester of FYOS	New instructors discuss their goals, expectations and concerns; Fall instructors respond.
February	Who is the FYO Student?	Lessons learned regarding students' 1) preparation and accountability, 2) level of engagement with UGA and 3) interaction with faculty
March	Engaging the First-Year Student: How can our experiences help future FYOS instructors?	Applying what we have learned: Tips on course design by Associate Director for Faculty and TA Development, Center for Teaching and Learning

the safety of the FLC, however, many faculty revealed themselves to be less confident on goals such as teaching the UGA mission in a way that connected to the class topic.

### Data Collection

Data were collected from participants in a semi-structured interview designed by the authors. The authors then contacted the participants to invite their participation and to provide consent forms for signature. Four participants interviewed by phone and two interviewed in person. Interviews lasted approximately thirty minutes and were recorded on a handheld recorder. The authors asked each participant the following questions:

1. What were your goals and expectations for this new course?
2. Describe your experience with the course, including successes or challenges with respect to your initial goals and expectations.
3. How did your participation in the faculty learning community impact your experience?

The authors also drew from FLC meetings and agreed upon some possible follow-up questions if the participants' responses warranted them. Some consideration was given to recruiting an external interviewer to speak with the participants to prevent any sense of unease that might prohibit honest responses. However, the authors decided that our presence at all meetings and for all discussions, both positive and negative, validated our

participation in this type of extended conversation (Wanca-Thibault, Shepherd, & Staley, 2002).

### Analysis

The authors analyzed the interview transcript using the grounded theory approach of constant comparison (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to identify emerging themes, and found the following appeared frequently in the interview responses: FYOS goals, course content, professor preparation, pedagogical issues, student preparation and student/faculty interaction. After the initial analysis the authors also obtained the assistance of a third rater, a qualitative researcher experienced in content analysis to review the transcripts in the same manner. The authors and the third rater agreed that three themes were predominant in the interview transcripts: pedagogy, student/faculty interaction and student preparation. Additionally, it was apparent that there was some difference in interpretation between the two authors and the additional rater with respect to the manner in which some interview data should be coded. For example, if a participant referenced interaction in class, one author interpreted the comment as an instance of a pedagogical issue while the other classified it as an example of student/faculty interaction. Similar cases were encountered in reference to professor preparation and pedagogy. Therefore, transcripts were reviewed a third and final time according to a reduced set of themes, defined here:

**Pedagogy:** related to instructional methods used during class or to the instructor's plan for the presentation of materials or assessments. Examples could include strategies to promote student interaction in class (student-to-student or student and professor), in-class activities and assessments, or the scheduling of assignments to promote comprehension and completion.

**Student performance:** related to student preparation before class, student participation in class, attendance, quality of student work.

**Student/faculty interaction:** related to one-on-one interaction between student and professor and distinct from regular student/faculty interaction normally occurring in class. Interaction could occur in or around the class period or outside of class, perhaps in the context of required event attendance or to discuss other academic matters.

### Results

Table 3 shows the number of comments made in response to the three interview questions, averaged over the three raters. The table includes all of the themes first identified by the FLC facilitators. As the FLC

members responded to the interview questions, the number of references they made to particular themes – student/faculty interaction, pedagogy and student performance – were seen to change. The changes in the frequency of the appearance of these themes in the faculty interviews will be the focus of the analysis presented here.

#### Research question 1: Changes to Faculty Expectations of the Course

**Student/faculty interaction.** Table 3 shows that the FYOS program goals and the desire for student/faculty interaction were the topics most on the minds of these participants when they decided to teach the course. Regarding the program goals, faculty noted several concerns, ranging from not receiving full information about them to uncertainty about how to meet them. Of particular concern for many faculty was the way they were supposed to introduce students to the mission of the university. Sara stated, "I was having trouble with the events. Trying to figure out how to make that part of the class as opposed to just an add-on." Faculty were collectively positive and optimistic, however, about their ability to interact with the students. Most of these faculty typically taught upper-level classes that were small enough to allow for regular interaction with students. Bob, who typically teaches first-year students, stated that his "expectation was that there was going to be another level of closeness" that he would experience with students, and he "expected that they would have a good time."

Reporting on their experiences with the new course, faculty comments regarding student/faculty interaction decreased slightly, but the nature of the comments reveal that the topic did not disappear from their minds, but rather surfaced in different ways, requiring the authors to give careful consideration to coding of responses. For instance, the confidence that faculty had noted at the beginning of the semester regarding the interaction they expected to have with students was later expressed as concern over how to structure class discussion in order to move freshmen beyond their reticence to give one word or yes/no responses. As Ann explained, "Sometimes [you have] to have very specific things for them to answer or you'll get the yes or no response." Her observation was coded in the analysis as a reference to pedagogy because she was referencing ways that she had to set up the context or question in order to get a quality student response, but indicated that if successful, said strategy might positively affect student/faculty interaction. Sam stated, "Getting eighteen year olds at their first impact with college to participate in a kind of spiritual, intellectual discussion...is asking a bit I think." As in the case of Ann's comment, Sam's comment was coded as

Table 3  
*Frequency of faculty comments by theme*

Theme	Goals for teaching course	Experiences in the course	Impact of FLC
FYOS goals	7	7	3
Professor preparation	3	2	2
Pedagogy	3	11	4
Student performance	4	5	1
Student/faculty interaction	6	4	4

"FYOS goals" because his remark addressed the feasibility of the program's goals, especially with regard to the readiness of the typical first-year student to interact on a level targeted by the program. Overall, it appears that the FLC faculty entered this new FYOS program thinking the small classroom environment would automatically create student-faculty interaction and dialogue, but that interaction did not occur at the level most of these faculty members expected. It should be noted, however, that each faculty member did indicate some level of positive student-faculty interaction did occur during the progression of the semester.

**Pedagogy.** When discussing their goals for the new course, faculty raised, albeit to a lesser degree, the issue of faculty preparation, and more specifically, how much preparation was necessary for a course that needed to be academically rigorous during just one contact hour per week. Faculty were also uncertain of how much pre-class preparation they could realistically expect from first-year students in this new course. Some comments highlighted their concerns about pedagogical approaches: would students actively participate in discussion with faculty and with each other? How were faculty to teach content in a way that revealed the larger purpose and mission of the university?

Most references to pedagogy occurred when faculty responded to the second interview question regarding changes to their expectations for the course. For example, both Sam and Sara suggested that they needed to be more explicit in the direction they provided to students. Similarly, Ann noted that she was "...going to change some things [such as] when we discuss things, make some more detailed information about what is required, and changing some of the grading schemes to increase the value of some things and maybe decrease the value of others." The authors also note that these comments reflect the sentiments expressed at several of the FLC meetings. As Table 3 demonstrates, the number of observations related to pedagogy rose while the number of comments related to the FYO goals remained the same. Generally speaking, faculty found it challenging to identify the best pedagogical approach for a first-year course with such

unique goals. They often sought input from one another regarding the best ways, for example, to introduce students to the mission of the university in a way that directly related to the particular content they were teaching.

**Student performance.** At the outset of the new course, faculty expectations regarding student performance were largely undefined. Institution wide, many faculty teaching in the FYO program had never taught freshmen before. Ann was one such faculty and stated that she "...wasn't too sure of what to expect from the students because I had not taught freshmen before. I typically teach graduate students." Sam recognized that the small-class environment would be something new for him, saying, "I teach the freshman, sophomore 1000-level courses, which...are in the big auditorium...so it's a lecture." Neither of these participants knew what to expect from first-year students in the small setting that the FYOS program guaranteed. Bob, who had extensive experience with first-year students in a small classroom setting stated that he "expected them to not understand what the seminar was, to have little if no information since they were college students just coming in...I expected them to be ready for me to make the sale." Across the entire FYOS program, it appears that faculty expectations of how well the first-year students would be prepared for a specific FYOS topic were mixed.

As with observations on student/faculty interaction and pedagogy, the authors observed a shift in the faculty comments regarding student preparation after they taught the course. Faculty noted a level of dissatisfaction with the student work product. Kate remarked that when she gave them their first assignment "I said 'you need to reference...make sure you reference where you got it from...if you're taking a picture off of something, make sure you're referencing that.'" Similarly, Bob indicated that he also provided detailed requirements for each assignment and made sure students were paying particular attention to questions that he was asking.

Faculty also differed in some of their experiences with students' level of preparation. Sam indicated that "student preparation was a problem," while Bob stated,

"Everything I gave them they were ready to engage in...They are very smart, and they are very capable." The contrast here may be attributable to the differing degree of experience that these instructors had with first-year students. Bob's discipline provides him with multiple opportunities to gauge the strengths and weaknesses of beginning college students, while Sam encounters them most frequently in large lecture classes where one-on-one interaction is much less frequent.

### Research Question 2: Impact of the FLC

In response to the third interview question about the impact of participation in the faculty learning community, faculty found the experience to be most helpful for providing additional, and sometimes new, pedagogical strategies to use in the freshman seminar and additionally, for learning new ways to encourage student/faculty interaction. All those interviewed also commented on the confirmation they received through the FLC that they were not the only FYOS instructors to experience challenges. Sam indicated that at the first of the semester,

He...was a little at a loss and then we started having these sessions, the learning community. And uh, it was very helpful to me in the sense that I got some tips...and what was more important than the tips was just the encouragement from people: they were facing similar problems.

Noting his struggles to achieve satisfactory interaction with students, Sam also stated,

You know in your mind you fantasize about how you react to students...and... again the learning community was important for getting me to think about other ways to engage the students and also to remind me that this is a common problem.

Kate also found the FLC to be confirming and to increase her ability to draw out the students. She stated that the FLC gave her "ways to kind of encourage the class to be more...lively [and use] ice breakers and how do you get them talking with each other and talking with you, so I think I got a lot of great ideas." She also noted that she,

Liked [the FLC] just because of the support that it offered. In a case like this, I hadn't taught a course like this, and it's good to be able to go in and, even if it's just to get it off your chest...and then to have someone reciprocate some of those ideas and say 'well I'm having that same problem' or 'I have it and this is how I'm trying to address it.'

On a more practical level, faculty responses to the third question underscored something that FLC meetings uncovered: that some of them did not have a complete understanding of the goals of the program. Sam indicated that if the FLC had not discussed the FYOS goals then he might not have known about them. The FLC provided a forum for providing clarity on this issue and further, for promoting exchange of specific ways to meet each goal. Kate, who indicated that she understood the goals but had trouble determining how to meet the requirements that all first-year students had to attend three academic events, stated that the FLC helped her learn "how to encourage [the students] to go to events, and what were the events like, and you know getting them involved in that."

Having addressed the patterns we found in the responses to the interviews, we would like to also devote some space in this paper to relating the individual "odysseys" of these faculty (identified by pseudonyms). Their observations about their experiences with the new seminar highlight the variety of ways that the common challenges of the new program were addressed and what they drew from the FLC to help them with those challenges.

### Faculty Observations

**Bob: On the right track.** Bob is an assistant professor and counselor working in a division of the university that supports students who need additional support and guidance for academic success. Bob's work puts him in regular contact with first-year students and equips him with perspective regarding the mindset of the new university student. While the FYOS program was a required program for all of UGA's first-year students, not merely those who need additional support, Bob was confident that his familiarity with the population and, more importantly, his typical mode of interaction with them would enable him to meet the goals of the program that targeted student/faculty interaction and an introduction to the academic culture of the university. Bob described his initial goals for the course as being able to "...help the student integrate in the intellectual and academic community...and to build a relationship with a faculty that is engaged in research and teaching here at the university." He also noted that his expectations for his students were as high as they would be in any other class, that they would be ready for him to "make the sale...and if I made the sale right, they would buy it." He stressed that his goal of closeness with the students was so important that it drove his course preparation, saying, "I did not want the course load to get in the way of...me building a relationship with them."

Bob was perhaps the only FLC member that did not confront a reality that challenged his initial goals.

Bob indicated that while the sale was not easy with every student, he "gained more confidence that...my goals were in line with the Odyssey program" and that listening to the experiences of others in the group confirmed that he was on the right track. Furthermore, evidence of Bob's success engaging his students in the academic culture was "a whole pile of papers over there...a research project that I am working on with a student from [that class]...and I fully expect it will get published. I mean, this is an eighteen or nineteen year-old getting published."

For Bob, the greatest benefit of his participation in the FLC was the confirmation it gave him that he was doing the right thing by both the program and his students. While he did mention the usefulness of the pedagogical strategies that were shared in the group, he indicated that the greatest benefit was the "good support" that came from being a witness to the "big spectrum of experiences of what was going on at the time."

**Sara: Delayed interaction.** Sara works in the Center for Teaching and Learning and teaches graduate student instructors how to teach undergraduate students. With this background as she began her FYOS seminar focused on motivation for learning. Sara "...was expecting to do an awesome job...to connect with them right away, the way I do with my graduate students." While Sara admitted that her recollection of teaching undergraduates was that sometimes it took an entire semester before everything fell into place enough for them to interact, she did not expect the FYOS to be that difficult because she expected her typical, interactive style of teaching would translate well to the small-class environment of the new FYOS course.

Sara observed that as she began the semester, she struggled with how much activity to plan for, knowing that undergraduates would be unlikely to extend discussion beyond the class plan as graduate students do. For some of the first weekly class meetings she felt that she almost under-planned because the students were not "as comfortable or at the level of maturity to really take a conversation...as opposed to just answer a question." She described having trouble incorporating the program's required campus event attendance in a way that integrated them into the course rather than seeming like an add-on. Sara also confessed to having trouble drawing students into discussions about the role of professors in the academic community, another of the program's outcomes. She told of starting off one class by telling of her experience presenting at a conference and sharing what she learned from other presenters, and she described that she was met by the blank stares of students who seemed to wonder, in her words, "when class was going to start."

Sara described her experience in leading her students to reflect on their own learning and to create

oral and written dialogues about it. Early in the semester she found that students were reliant on prompts or examples that she gave, and they could not progress beyond a few responses in order to form a continuing and expanding dialogue about their history of, and motivations for, learning. Sara found herself adjusting pedagogical techniques until she arrived at a form of student reflections that students could feel comfortable with and use to create continued dialogue.

Sara found the FLC to be a good forum for picking up ideas from others, "...taking pages and pages of notes of try this, try this and bouncing ideas..." Perhaps more helpful than tips, however, was hearing others describe their struggles and, like Bob, feeling reaffirmed that, for the most part, she was taking the right approach to her first-year seminar.

**Sam: Unlucky stars?** Sam is a professor of astronomy who normally teaches upper level undergraduate and graduate courses. His experience with freshmen has historically been limited to the large lecture courses of one hundred or more students, where interaction between faculty and students is often limited. Sam began his FYOS course with hopes for great dialogue with freshmen on topics such as Einstein's theories of relativity. His plan was to "ask them a few questions to get them started and really engage them in some thinking in class." What Sam encountered, however, were students who were "very reticent about talking...It was really hard to get them to say anything." Sam admits to being uncomfortable with silence, and he began to fill that silence by filling in with more information and, after a few class periods, found himself back in his lecture mode. This was a point of frustration because Sam knew that the course was not supposed to be a lecture, and he wasn't sure how to spur the student/faculty dialogue. His need for new ideas led him to the FLC.

Sam joined the FLC early in the first semester and found it to be helpful in two ways. First, he drew upon the suggestions of others in the group and made changes to his pedagogy, "...taking more of a practical approach...asking simpler questions rather than a broad question like 'what is the nature of space?'" Sam also realized that if he wanted students to be prepared for discussion, he needed to provide them with forms of assistance such as reminders about assignments and questions to guide reading. Sam indicated that the new approaches helped increase interaction in class, though it did not quite become "this great Socratic dialogue." A second benefit of Sam's FLC participation was that it led him to reexamine his expectations about himself as professor and his students as partners in an academic discussion. He also confessed to unrealistic expectations about the students, anticipating that their "[fascination] about that stuff" would be revealed in active class discussion. The discussions in our FLC

meetings helped him realize that what is more common in a class like this is that students need help getting to the point where they can move the conversation forward on their own. His participation in the group also influenced his views on student participation, saying,

I learned from the learning community that class participation is not necessarily a student who raises her hand every five minutes to ask a question. It's somebody who is attentive and paying attention...maybe they are too shy or just afraid of something that is intellectually daunting like the theory of relativity.

**Kate: Cultivating quality work.** Kate is an associate professor of landscape architecture who taught a freshman seminar on educational gardens. As part of the class her students toured and researched local school garden projects. At the outset of the semester Kate was hopeful that her students had enrolled due to their interest in the topic, and her initial challenge was how to give them what they needed to stimulate that interest without overburdening them with work for a one-hour course. Very early in the semester Kate found herself changing some of the assignments she had pre-planned in order to achieve a better balance.

As Kate taught the course she confronted a level of student work that did not meet her expectations. She referenced assignments that were hand-written or contained information copied and pasted from Internet sources that were never referenced. Kate described a sense of shock that her students would not put more effort into their work product, but she admitted that she was accustomed to something quite different from upper-division students. Therefore, she decided to make adjustments to the course that would provide students the structured guidance that they needed while also prioritizing their enjoyment of the experience. To do this, she began to provide more details with each assignment so that students would better understand what is expected of college-level work, and at the same time she introduced more opportunities for lively interaction both in class and on an increased number of field trips. Kate came to believe that if she didn't take it quite so seriously and tried better to meet students at their level of need, the students would get more out of the class.

Kate indicated that the FLC was for her a needed source of support and confirmation that others were facing the same challenges with regard to student preparation and work product. She gained some new pedagogical strategies from the group and, in particular, learned of new ways to connect the program's required event attendance to the content of the course. Kate

noted that in her preparation for the course she put a lot of effort into teaching the content in a way that connected to the published goals of the course, but while teaching she wondered if the students really attained those lofty goals in just a one-hour course. She stated that while her colleagues in the FLC gave her great ideas, she felt that it was still very much up to the individual instructor to find a way to make the marriage work between the course content and the program goals.

**Grace: Lost in translation.** Grace is an assistant professor of theoretical linguistics and began her course in the new program very enthusiastic about the goals and looking forward to the opportunity to connect with students in conversations about her discipline. She was looking forward to teaching a class in which she could "interact more closely with a small group and be different from their other classes." Grace also welcomed the opportunity to engage new students in the academic culture of the university, to "show them a side of the university or their professors that they don't normally see." She admitted to a small amount of uncertainty about how to interest the students in her theoretical research and not lose them.

Grace was not able to engage all of her students, saying that in her class of thirteen there were only about three students that were "on board." Her expectation that students would be interested in getting a closer look at the ways that faculty pursue knowledge in their area was largely unmet. Her comments in the interview focused on the structure of the program and her suspicion that perhaps its significance was lost on first-year students. Specifically, she noted that students who were overwhelmed by the large new environment in which they found themselves and managing several classes might find it too easy to lower their work ethic for a one-hour course.

Attending FLC meetings benefitted Grace in ways similar to what other participants reported. She found it helpful to talk to people who saw some of the same issues arise and who concurred that "[the students] are not quite as curious about what we do as we hoped they would be." She also extracted ideas for enhancing student/faculty interaction and for making her pre-planned assignments more manageable for the students and more collaborative. During one FLC meeting she worked with other participants to redesign an assignment built around a language data set, and she left the meeting with two new versions of the assignment, both requiring students to work together, submit, revise and resubmit the assignment.

**Ann: The new world of freshmen.** Ann is an associate professor of population health in one of the university's professional schools. As such, she teaches graduate students and some upper division undergraduate students. Ann's FYOS seminar marked

the first time she had taught freshmen. She taught her course through the vehicle of a non-fiction work about genetic research. She was uncertain about what to expect from first-year students, but was optimistic that she could engage them in good discussions about some of the controversies surrounding research protocols. She expected that she might need to experiment with the balance of guidance and what she called "hand-holding" regarding their work ethic.

After teaching her seminar Ann stated, "I would say that [my expectations] were different, but not lower." Like other FLC members said in their interviews, she recognized a need to arrange things differently, such as the timing and format of certain discussions or quizzes. She saw that her students had difficulty retaining material covered over half a semester and thought that a better strategy might be to assess them on smaller chunks of material. She insisted, however, that the amount of work that she gave them was appropriate, despite the protests of some students, and that if she taught the class a second time she would not decrease the amount of work, but "just spread it out differently" throughout the semester.

As she expected at the outset, she did have to work to find a balance between helping them complete their assignments and encouraging them to be self-reliant and responsible. Ann described her struggle to impress upon students the need to attend class regularly and to turn in assignments on time. From students who did not attend required out-of-class events that Ann scheduled according to their preferences to students who unapologetically told her they would not be able to submit an assignment, Ann navigated a semester of many challenges. Like Grace, Ann wondered if students were not ascribing sufficient importance to the one-hour course.

Ann's situation was also unique to that of the other participants presented here because she taught her seminar in the spring semester, unlike the others who taught in the fall. Ann joined the FLC in the fall specifically to allow herself a full semester of group discussion as she prepared her seminar. Like the others, she was grateful for a supportive group that shared similar struggles, confirming for her that her challenges were common to many. She described having picked up many tips for engaging the first-year student reticent to speak in class. Accustomed to graduate students whom "you have to shut up sometimes," Ann was not used to having to pull responses out of students. Even with a whole semester of participation in the fall semester of the FLC she faced challenges once in the classroom with her first-year students, Ann found her second semester in the FLC helpful to "bounce ideas off of the faculty...even to listen to other people say that it didn't work [for them]."

## Discussion

The first goal of the FLC was to provide structured assistance to the FYOS instructors in the form of resources, strategies and partnership-building. The interview data indicate the FLC did in fact provide a place where faculty felt comfortable admitting to the challenges and working together to identify possible solutions. Faculty repeatedly mentioned the benefit of learning that they were "not alone" in the challenges they were facing. In this FLC the faculty more experienced with freshmen often provided mentoring to those less experienced, as seen elsewhere (Kemp & O'Keefe, 2003) and as noted by Ann, who stated,

I found it very helpful because you had people there who taught freshmen before, so that was good for getting ideas...of how to...get my syllabus together a lot better, get ideas as far as how to engage the students...a lot more help through the FLC than I would have come up with on my own.

The second goal of the FLC was to elicit feedback that could inform future institutional efforts to support FYOS faculty. With regard to pedagogy, several of the faculty interviewed shared the difficulties of planning the right amount and type of activities to stimulate class discussion. Ann and Sam admitted struggling with the "balancing act" of knowing how much of what Ann called "hand-holding" to give students and how much to expect that they do on their own. These comments echo previous findings that teaching first-year students forces faculty to rethink their pedagogy, sometimes broadly and sometimes in methodologically specific ways (McClure, Atkinson, & Wills 2008, p. 43; Wanca-Thibault, Shepherd, & Staley, 2002). The information collected through this FLC can provide direction for future faculty development efforts for FYOS faculty, designed and delivered through institutional channels such as the Center for Teaching and Learning. Such events could address topics such as the amount and type of work to assign in a first-year seminar, how to elicit discussion from hesitant first-year students, how to address the required campus events in a way that integrates them into the course topic, and much more. In our FLC strides were made in this area, and our successes would be a valuable resource for future FYOS faculty.

## Limitations

There are a few limitations to this study. First, the authors conducted the interviews after faculty had finished their first FYOS classes, compromising somewhat the thoroughness of the responses to the first question regarding their goals and expectations.

Although the question was addressed at the first meeting (see the discussion schedule in Table 2), in a second iteration of this study the question would be asked before the start of classes and before the first meeting of the FLC.

Lastly, as with data from any FLC, the factor of participant self-selection must be considered. These faculty joined the FLC because they care about teaching. Therefore, their perception of challenges may be heightened in comparison to others who might be less committed to success in the new course. In like manner, they may be more apt to draw upon the experiences of colleagues, such as their fellow FLC members, and to apply them quickly in their own courses.

### Implications

UGA's Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) coordinates approximately one dozen faculty learning communities each year. In the opinion of the authors, drawing upon evidence from the FLC described here, the CTL should support an FLC for the FYOS program on a continual basis. At the time of this writing a second iteration of the FYOS FLC is up and running, facilitated by the faculty director of the FYOS program. The challenge to future FLCs, and to the FYOS program itself, is to continually draw new faculty that could provide fresh perspectives each year and to make those perspectives available to other FYOS faculty, campus wide, as a form of faculty development. Furthermore, the authors recommend that current and future FLCs be utilized as a formal assessment measure of the new program to complement measures already in place. This would further enable the university to more comprehensively track the faculty and student experience over the lifespan of this program in order to ensure its continual improvement.

The findings of this research may have applications on a broader scale. While some institutions do offer or even require an orientation or workshops to prepare faculty for teaching in a first-year seminar program, our research to date finds no evidence of the use of faculty learning communities as a means of developing faculty for this type of teaching. Previous research even suggests that "faculty to faculty" networking was one of the least employed means of working toward a common goal of student retention and success (Calder & Gordon, 1999, p. 22). However, one of the greatest features of FLCs is that they span a year, allowing for faculty to build relationships, view one another as resources, and perhaps to observe their own growth and improvement as faculty. Previous studies have shown that faculty who derive personal satisfaction from teaching first-year students are likely to persist, thus contributing the other overall success of the program

(McClure, Atkinson, & Wills, 2008; Soldner, Lee, & Duby, 2004). Therefore, it is the opinion of the authors that, while the design and goals of the first-year program described here is specific to one institution, the potential gains to faculty might be observed anywhere. We would therefore call for other studies of the effects of faculty learning communities on the preparation, satisfaction and growth of first-year instructors.

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#### Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank Denise Domizi for her assistance with the analysis and for her suggestions on a late version of the paper.